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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001817

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: JVP DENIES RUMORS OF RIFT IN ALLIANCE;
BLAMES UNP

REF: COLOMBO 1794

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Members of the JVP leadership denied recent press speculation of a growing rift between President Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and alliance partner Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP). Despite some internal disagreements--like the size of the Cabinet--there is consensus on matters of general policy, they claimed--a consensus that they are confident the upcoming budget will reflect. Although the JVP is committed to the peace process, the intransigence and insincerity of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, coupled with Norway's partiality toward the Tigers, undermines prospects for negotiations, they charged. While the JVP's rosy description of relations with the SLFP papers over some significant differences in perspective and policy, the former revolutionaries appear to have decided to remain in the alliance--perhaps banking on the upcoming budget to help them make good on pie-in-the-sky campaign promises--in the near term. End summary.

JVP ACKNOWLEDGES PROBLEMS--
BUT NO CRISIS--IN ALLIANCE

2. (SBU) In a November 4 meeting with poloff, Tilvin Silva, General Secretary of the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), and JVP MP and Propaganda Secretary Wimal Weerawansa discounted press reports of a growing rift in the alliance between their party and President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Instead, they blamed the opposition United National Party (UNP) for spreading the rumors and ensuring their sensationalized coverage in the press.

3. (SBU) Occasional problems and differences of opinion are to be expected among alliance partners, Silva acknowledged, but most of the recent controversy has been manufactured by the press and UNP. The press in Sri Lanka does not report news; it fabricates news, he grumbled. Reports of an intra-alliance clash over an agricultural project were completely overblown, Weerawansa claimed (Reftel); the real cause of the problem is the "competition" SLFP MPs feel with the JVP because of the popularity of the JVP-sponsored program. The UNP, meanwhile, feels threatened by the JVP's growing popularity and is thus trying to discredit the party's image, Weerawansa charged, adding that he feels lucky that the UNP is focusing on a mythical rift in the alliance instead of the (very real) escalating cost of living to attack the JVP.

4. (SBU) The "understanding" on policy between the two alliance partners will be reflected in the upcoming budget, Silva asserted confidently. Among the programs Weerawansa and Silva said they expect to see supported in the budget are promotion of local production (through more generous support for agriculture and small- and medium-sized industries) and salary increases for public servants and estate workers. Although they would not confirm the size of the proposed salary increase, they indicated they expected to be satisfied with the amount. (Note: The JVP had originally pressed for a 70 percent pay hike. Small Industries Minister and JVP Trade Union Leader Lal Kantha has led a few token strikes over the past week, including in the health sector, to demand a "reasonable" increase. End note.)

THE ALLIANCE'S MORAL CONSCIENCE

5. (SBU) Weerawansa sidestepped questions about his recent speech criticizing President Kumaratunga (Reftel), only blaming UNP manipulation of the press for taking his comments out of context. (He did not, however, deny the remarks attributed to him.) That said, more than 50 percent of the people who voted for the ruling alliance voted for the JVP, Silva asserted, because "they believed we will continue struggling for the masses." Thus, if the JVP observes the

government doing something wrong, the party is obliged to criticize such actions, he said. That was the promise the JVP had made to the masses; it must be honored. Such criticisms focus on actions and performance, rather than personalities, Silva emphasized, and should not be misconstrued as personal attacks. Weerawansa cited the ever-expanding Cabinet as an example of Government wrongdoing that merited JVP censure. The appointment of 83 ministers "has to be criticized," he said, especially since the JVP had made a point on the campaign trail of limiting the Cabinet to 35.

LTTE INSINCERE; NORWAY PARTIAL

16. (SBU) The JVP is strongly committed to achieving lasting peace in Sri Lanka, Weerawansa said. Unfortunately, progress toward that peace has come to a standstill because of the insistence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that its proposal for an Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) form the sole basis for resumed negotiations, he continued. Given the lack of other signs of movement, Weerawansa said that JVP participation in the President's National Advisory Council provides a "useful opportunity for us to exhibit our commitment to lasting peace," while offering other interested parties, such as religious organizations and NGOs, a forum to exchange views. Because finding an equitable settlement to the conflict is not a simple issue, Silva noted, multipartisan fora like the National Advisory Council are needed to develop a national consensus on the many questions involved.

17. (SBU) Both Weerawansa and Silva believe that the LTTE is not sincere in pursuing negotiations at this time. Experience shows that the LTTE always comes to the table with ulterior motives, Silva asserted. Now the LTTE is using its insistence on the ISGA as a way to buy time while it attempts to reclaim its lost support in the East, he charged. The Tigers may also be waiting for a UNP government to come back into power, Silva suggested, since they believe the UNP is more pliable than the alliance. Despite their mistrust of LTTE motives, however, Weerawansa and Silva said they believe the government must pursue dialogue with the Tigers. Any negotiated settlement must ensure multi-party democracy, pluralism and respect for human rights, Silva emphasized--principles that the JVP clearly does not see reflected in the ISGA.

18. (SBU) Weerawansa and Silva acknowledged that the international community can play a helpful role in promoting a peaceful resolution--as long as it is aware of what is actually going on in the North and East. As a facilitator, Norway has not developed that awareness, they suggested. Accusing Norway of blatant partiality toward the Tigers, Silva claimed that most of the problems in achieving a negotiated settlement "intensified" after Norway's involvement.

COMMENT

19. (C) While the UNP would surely welcome--and might even help propagate--rumors of a split in the alliance, the reports have been too widespread, including in the pro-SLFP press, for the phenomenon to be wholly an opposition fabrication. More than anything else, the President's failure to consult the JVP on certain policy issues, including Cabinet appointments and the peace process, rankles her coalition partner, eliciting periodic reminders, generally conveyed through the media, from that partner of just how dependent her coalition is upon the JVP's continued goodwill. That said, the JVP appears acutely aware of its obligations to prove itself to the "masses" by fulfilling, at least in part, some of its many generous campaign promises. While the JVP duo's descriptions of intra-alliance amity and consensus sound too good to be true, it seems clear that the JVP leadership for now has decided to stay the course with the alliance--and see what it can squeeze out of the budget.

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